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Uruguay's rebels try legitimate political role

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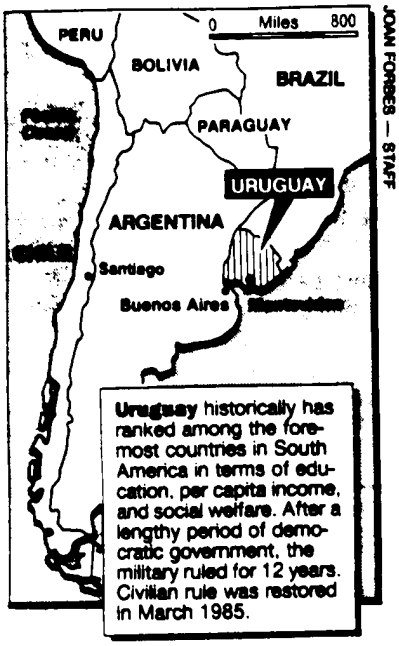
In the late 1960s, Jesús Arguinarena was an architecture student. He was also one of a growing number of young Uruguayans who thought membership in the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN), or Tupamaro guerrilla movement, was the only way to bring about social and economic change in his country.

In the eight months before his 1971 arrest, Mr. Arguinarena used his design skills to devise false walls and underground passages for Tupamaros to hide in.



JOAN FORBES — STAFF

Now, after 12 years in jail and a year and a half in exile in Spain, Arguinarena is trying to reconstruct his personal and political life along with the rest of a nation emerging from 12 years of military dictatorship preceded by a period of violence and political instability. (One of every 60 Uruguayan citizens was detained at some point during this period.)

During the first month of democratic rule in March 1985, the government freed all political prisoners, including Tupamaros, from jail. Opponents of the military regime were allowed to return from exile, and thousands of public-sector workers who had lost their jobs for political reasons were reinstated.

At least 20,000 exiles have returned and an estimated 9,000 people have been given back their jobs since democratic rule was restored, says Victor Valliant, head of the government's repatriation commission.

While the reintegration has been heralded and termed successful by many, it has been a slow and often painful process.

"There are many scars," says journalist Samuel Blixen, who likened his time in jail for Tupamaro activities to "being frozen for 12 years. The political reality had changed. We came out into a country we didn't know, to wives and children who had grown and didn't really know us."

There are also the effects of the systematic application of torture methods that human rights monitors say were designed to totally break the victims rather than kill them.

"We are not people that are completely intact," says Tupamaro leader Raúl Sendic, who was kept in a well for much of his internment and still has problems speaking clearly because he was denied medical treatment for a bullet wound he suffered during his capture.

Mr. Sendic says operating as a legal political group instead of a clandestine movement using guerrilla warfare has been one of the most difficult adjustments. Members were used to working in small groups in a highly secretive cell structure and are simply not versed in traditional political skills, he says. Nonetheless, in their first press conference, the Tupamaros declared their intent to be a nonviolent group and are working toward a more visible public profile.

In early January, the Tupamaros moved into a huge but deteriorated colonial-style building that will serve as their political headquarters. Arguinarena says the movement now has at least 1,000 active political members. Their Marxist, nationalistic ideology is much the same as it was in the 1960s, calling for such things as rural land reform, better conditions for laborers, and government action to prevent foreign ownership and intervention.

Some 17,000 Uruguayans showed up when the Tupamaros staged their first political rally in December to explain their position on various issues. Still, the electoral future of the Tupamaros is uncertain.

Their attempts to join the Broad Front, a coalition of leftist parties, have been stymied so far. (Under Uruguay's complex electoral system, only three political groupings are recognized by law. Those include the traditional Colorado and National parties and the Christian Democrats, who have permitted the Broad Front to participate in their group since 1971.)

While the Tupamaros have been overwhelmingly accepted back into Uruguayan society by most accounts, critics point out that recently they have been more ambiguous in their response to questions about the use of violence. There is also the stigma of their past. Many Uruguayans blame the Tupamaros for the increasing militarization the country went through in the six years preceding what became a de facto *coup d'état* with the dissolution of parliament in 1973.

Some political observers argue that the political reality was much more complex. In addition to fighting Tupamaro subversion, they say, the military used repression as a tool to combat massive demonstrations by students and workers protesting severe economic and social problems. Newspapers were closed and an increasing number of politicians and union activists were jailed and proscribed in an escalating climate of confrontation and insecurity.

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Uruguayan police: less violence to contend with

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"We saw injustice at many levels," says Arguinarena, explaining why he and other students joined the Tupamaros. He recalled that in 1968, three students were killed and hundreds injured during demonstrations, including protests against a government decision to intervene in the running of the country's universities in a bid to prevent further radicalization.

Before their defeat by the military between 1971 and 1972, the Tupamaros had some 500 active guerrillas and up to 7,000 direct supporters, including political sectors within the Broad Front.

Initial actions in the mid-1960s included such Robin Hood-style tactics as robbing food to distribute to the poor, which won them some public sympathy. But by decade's end, the Tupamaros had gone underground to launch urban guerrilla warfare. Multinational companies and banks were bombed. Government officials and diplomats became targets for kidnap, and security forces personnel were assassinated.

One of the Tupamaros' most notorious acts was the 1970 kidnapping and murder of Dan Mitrione, a former US police chief, who the guerrillas accused of being a CIA operative and instructor in torture.

Arguinarena and other Tupamaros interviewed say those actions were in response to increasing state violence. They concede there were some strategic errors, notably the lack of a defined strategy, but do not believe what they did was wrong.

Yet survival, rather than revolutionary politics, is the priority, says Arguinarena. After his return from exile, it took him six months to find a job. Family connections finally enabled him to acquire a part-time job in a workshop that designs stamps to be printed on fabric.